

In The Nation

A Check on C. I. A. That Worked Well

By ARTHUR KROCK

WASHINGTON, April 24.—What the President has officially designated as "a Government-wide study of para-military operations within the Government" will be heavily concentrated on the Central Intelligence Agency, especially on its operating function that many observers think should not be allowed to an intelligence-collecting group. But in the course of the study the four distinguished persons the President appointed to conduct it may also find something of value in the record of a formal supervising committee for the agency that existed in its early period and is remembered as having worked well.

This committee was composed of three high officials—the under Secretaries of State and Defense and the Director of the C. I. A. According to those familiar with the committee's history, it reviewed all proposed projects of the agency, decided whether to approve or disapprove them, reported its judgments to the National Security Council and kept key members of Congress informally advised of C. I. A. operations. One day a week was assigned to the review with whatever additional time was necessary for the reports to the N. S. C. and at the Capitol necessary for the relays.

This check on C. I. A. projects, and the informatory meetings with Congressional leaders, must be assumed to have worked well because in this period the agency was not involved in any disastrous failure, such as that recently in the rebel landings in Cuba. Also, the recurrent moves in Congress for a C. I. A. watchdog committee made no headway. Whether a formal supervisory group, constituted as was this previous Government committee, would have vetoed the concept or the timing of the disastrous Cuban adventure, or both, and advised the N. S. C. and the President against it must remain forever in the impenetrable cloud-land of speculation.

But a parallel in Washington to believe that a counterpart of the old committee had been in existence in the last few weeks, and with the same assignment of responsibility for the C. I. A., the faults of the concept and the timing of the anti-Castro actions would not have been approved as they were by all official channels.

If this opinion is accepted as reasonable speculation, on the basis that the defects of the project would have been urged with the authority and prestige of two members, or even one, of an official supervising group of the C. I. A., then there is room for the further speculation that the President would have returned the project to the agency for more deliberation and repairs. And, since developments subsequent to the failure in Cuba at least suggest that no definite program was laid out for immediate and positive steps to be taken in event of the failure which occurred, it may be that this program would have been in readiness if a strong dissent had been registered in advance of the expedition by members of a C. I. A. supervising committee.

Revival of Call for a 'Watchdog'

At any rate, an inspection of the committee's record would appear to commend itself to the four Presidential appointees to make the forthcoming study—Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, Attorney General Kennedy, Admiral Burke and C. I. A. Director Dulles. Findings should be highly pertinent to the expected renewal of proposals that the agency, like the Atomic Energy Commission, be supervised by a joint Congressional committee. This relation of Congress to the A. E. C. is established in law. And, though secrecy of projects and operations is as indispensable to the A. E. C. as it is to the C. I. A., there has been only one Congressional leak of any consequence at the expense of the commission, and that was unimportant in consequences.

The vital element of secrecy in agency activities, however, has been successfully urged thus far against proposals that Congress assume to it a similar legal relation. Though a law to this effect was favored by Gen. W. Bedell Smith when he was in charge of the C. I. A., Director Dulles has always opposed it. As a counterpart, he, as did General Smith, frequently briefs key members of Congress. But this informational process is not comparable to that of the A. E. C. to the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy.

The old C. I. A. supervising committee of three took the middle position and regularly though informally kept certain leaders of Congress generally informed. The new study group might profit by reviewing this period.